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## **County Council gets an earful at Kensington meeting**

### **Residents complain about Noyes library closure, ambulance fees and Costco gas station**

by Erin Donaghue | Staff Writer

The Montgomery County Council fielded residents' concerns at a recent forum on such hot-button topics as ambulance fees, the temporary closure of the Noyes library and a 16-bay gas station planned to accompany a proposed Costco in the Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center.

Residents packed a meeting room at the Housing Opportunities Commission Office Building in Kensington on March 24, leaving standing room only as Kensington, Silver Spring and Wheaton residents spoke mostly about concerns stemming from County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposed fiscal 2011 budget, aimed to close a \$779 million budget gap.

The County Council is slated to vote on that budget in May.

Kensington resident Jack Gaffey was among several who protested the temporary closure of the Noyes Library for Young Children in Kensington. If Leggett's budget moves forward, the popular library would close for two years, saving an annual \$202,000 and allowing time to reorganize the library's space and make it handicapped accessible.

"It's really a central piece of this community — please keep it open," Gaffey pleaded.

If the budget is approved, County Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said the library would be "better than ever before" when it reopens. The library would be accessible to all and better adapted to meet the needs of younger readers, council members said.

"We've heard from the community, and we know this is a beloved library," said County Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring.

Leventhal also fielded opposition to Leggett's proposed ambulance fees. The fees, which could generate as much as \$15 million a year, would be charged to a patient's insurer. Patients without insurance would not be charged, Leventhal said. The proposed fees have been opposed by many county volunteer firefighters, who argue they could deter residents from contacting responders.

At the meeting, several council members came out in opposition to Leggett's proposed zoning text amendment that would ease the process for Costco—which hopes to build a store in the Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center—to build a gas station near the site.

The council will consider a \$4 million subsidy next year that would go toward the \$60 million, 232,000-square-foot store. Some Kensington Heights residents have said they support the store, but not the gas station.

Residents who came to the meeting were incensed about the proposed zoning text amendment, which would allow for gas stations in regional shopping centers. The zoning amendment would allow Costco to forgo the special exception process — a lengthy review that would analyze the stations' impact on surrounding neighborhoods.

The amendment would "give a blank check to Westfield and Costco," said Kensington Heights resident Danila Sheveiko, calling the amendment "reprehensible."

County Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said he did not support the public subsidy for Costco — arguing the company should come to Westfield "on their own dime" — and came out against a gas station there.

Ervin and County Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park both said that the special exception process was the correct way to review the gas station.

Elrich also noted the proximity of the proposed station to homes and a popular swimming pool. "I'm not surprised you all don't think it's a particularly bright idea, either," Elrich said to applause.